

Curtis, (J. J.)

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THE RELATIONS OF  
HOMŒOPATHY TO CHEMISTRY.

DR. CURTIS'S ADDRESS.

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OF  
HOMŒOPATHY TO CHEMISTRY;  
AN INAUGURAL ADDRESS,

DELIVERED BEFORE  
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## ADDRESS.

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COLLEAGUES !

AND LADIES AND GENTLEMEN :

Two years have passed since this Academy first claimed an existence. Brief as is this period when compared with the epochs of science, it is not devoid of animating tokens of progress in our common art. The creation of colleges for its impartation, the establishment of societies for its support and diffusion, and its growing authority as a method, are chiefly conspicuous. This, its current history, so flattering to the past, so promising to the future, is the state of a branch of science, which a little more than a quarter of a century ago earliest sought the hospitality of American thought.

At that time, a single convert returning to this, his native country, from Copenhagen, where he had spent sixteen years in the study and exercise of the medical art, brought with him the practice of Hahnemann. This early disciple was the late Dr. H. B. Gram. The history of this accomplished and eccentric ornament of our school is scarcely known, except to those who, as pupils or friends, enjoyed his personal



acquaintance. Abroad he had obtained an honorable distinction, and came hither with special testimonials from Callisen, Saxtorph, Falkenthal, Fenger, and other celebrities in Danish medicine. As a passing proof of the estimation in which he was held by his foreign colleagues, it may be instanced that, several years after his return, he was professionally consulted by the last of the above named, then surgeon to the king. Here, Mitchell, Hosack and Pascalis, honored him with their regard. The discourteous reception, however, given to his translation of the "Spirit of the Homœopathic Doctrine," satisfied him that the time for the public promulgation of the new discovery had not yet come, an opinion which he mainly entertained up to his death, and which, unfortunately, neither the encouragement of his friends nor his own varied and extensive capabilities could induce him to alter. He died in 1840.

It has been affirmed of Gram, that his practice was mixed and eclectic. This charge will need no explanation, if we consider that, in the greater part of his career, the appliances of our method were still too limited to meet all the manifold exigencies of disease.

Thus much as a transient tribute to this noble and neglected spirit. He was the worthy herald of cis-Atlantic Homœopathy.

Between this single voice then raised in its favor, and the present response, what a contrast! Fifteen hundred physicians of our land now own its worth and dispense its resources. It is the just panegyric of our school that these are not adventurers, who have overleaped the walls of privilege and the qualifications of teaching, but, with the rarest exceptions, men of accredited ability in the received systems of medicine, who, from a catholic regard for truth, have embraced Homœopathy, and brought their badges of professional merit as a graceful offering to its superiority; their verdict for it is the voluntary suffrage of adepts. And who are the non-professional advocates of the new method? They are a large and brilliant clientage, who have brought Homœopathy



to the touchstone of experience, and whose culture, judgment and liberality are its pride and hope.

Let us pass from this glimpse at its fortunes to a hasty survey of the subject itself. What are its distinguishing characteristics? In what respect does it differ from the heterogeneous mass of medical practice, classed by Hahnemann under the descriptive title, Allopathy?

It is apparent to every one, that were the past history of medicine a success, had it accomplished the end for which it labored, to wit, the cure of the sick, no reformation of it had ever been agitated or necessary. The principles of mathematics, the canons of art are subject to no essential variation; so far as developed, they were the same centuries ago as they are at this moment, and fulfilled then, equally, the uses of science and beauty. That the case is widely different in medicine, its past and recent experience affords sufficient and painful proof. Its whole history, up to the time of Hahnemann, exhibits it as powerless to direct the choice of specific remedies. Yet this *desideratum*, this instinctive demand of the sick, is obviously the *sine quâ non* of its pretensions to the rank of a science. Was medicine, then, as previously applied, destitute of principles? If by principles be meant rules of practice of exact scope, corroborated by experience, and hence, the revelation of the true in nature, we must admit that, until the recognition of the law, *similia similibus curantur*, such have been wanting. Even faithful records of such cures as accident or good fortune afforded suffering humanity, are but scantily dispersed through its annals. Such records had, at least, served as the basis of an ample and useful empiricism, and sustained the art in dignified poverty until the detection of laws which should integrate and give symmetry to its facts, and make its results predictable. Without laws like these, what other than moral differences are observable between the physician and the charlatan?

The nineteenth century had nearly come, and yet these laws were not. Surgery, obstetrics, anatomy, physiology, chemistry, in fine, all the mechanical and physical studies in

medicine had found their place, and grew up in fair proportions; but therapeutics, or the art of healing, more royal than the rest, consorted with the mountebank, or impatiently invoked its ends by hypotheses, which nature foiled and disowned. The invalid languished for help, or hesitatingly committed his keeping to an artist whose weapon he feared to be uncertain as a bow drawn at a venture. Of this artist, it was the misfortune, rather than the fault, to fail often of his high function. It was his sacred calling to guide the profoundest of all mysteries, even to control the rites of a temple of nature, as the sick man is eloquently called by Hufeland. What wonder that, in this priesthood, and before this mystic shrine, the pomp of human learning should stand disclosed as a failing rod and a tattered mantle!

This was medicine. The relation between diseases and their specific remedies, perverser problem than the riddle of the Sphinx, or the famous Gordian knot, remained unsolved. To clear up this mystery was the renown of Hahnemann. A single precept, illumined by him, interlocked the observations of the past in one splendid formula; it is *similia similibus curantur*, or, like cures like—a great goal was won; medicine first possessed a theory; for the first time it stood among the sciences, and, though poor in trophies, the anointed of them all.

The physician alone is capable of appreciating at once the vast practical significance of this formula. At the very threshold of his examination, he perceives that, true or false, it is at least a scheme of an essentially practical character, and one capable of practical application to all the individual varieties of disease, which he may be called upon to encounter. In its operation, it points not indifferently to a whole class of remedies, these for the most part gratuitously classed, but seeks with discriminating dip, the agent whose action is nearest affiliated with the malady to be cured. And is this principle true? The progress of Homœopathy suggests the answer. Nay, creditable though its archives are, they do not yet illustrate the practice of this law with

the uniformity and purity it deserves. It is wholesome to admit that our failures often needlessly disparage our system and the names identified with its reputation.

I have sketched then, rapidly, the peculiarities of Hahnemann's discovery—I have endeavored to display it as the noblest contribution to specific medicine and to suggest its practical advantages over traditional, empirical and speculative ways of treating the sick. It was, indeed, the birth of organic therapeutics. When viewed in contrast with codes which have preceded it, Homœopathy compares as a harmonious structure to cumbrous heaps, wherein the treasures of the builder lie amassed in formless profusion.

The history of the development of Homœopathy is Hahnemann's best eulogy. From beginnings confined to fleeting thought, from nurture apparently too slender to protect it from the withering breath of prejudice, and the assaults of those who loved it not, it grew to be the pride and solace of him, who had long fostered it alone and hid its young hope in his courageous heart. In the law, *similia similibus*, we find the form, but not the substance of the art. Its *matériel* consists of those records of drug-disease, furnished by its author as the fruit of twenty years of experiment, added to similar trials made by his followers and the gleanings of drug-effects derived from the history of medicine at large. To enlarge and perfect these portraits of artificial diseases, and hence facilitate their comparison with natural maladies, has been the constant aim of the practitioner of Homœopathy. Our indebtedness to our predecessors, the little troop who, in Europe and here, broke with Hahnemann, the refractory soil, our obligation to those who look to us for professional aid, and our aspiration for the perfect, call for our co-operation in the offer of such tribute, as we deem not unworthy the cause we honor. It is in this spirit I beg leave to bring before your notice some remarks on the subject of *Materia Medica*, which appear based on great truths, and, as such, promise to become of vital importance to the sole object of our calling, which, as Hahnemann says with



quaint directness, is "to make sick men well." In view of the decidedly practical tendency of the thought, I trust it will not prove uninteresting to non-professional members of the audience, and that they will pardon the occasional use of such terminology as succinctness renders unavoidable.

To determine the relations of medicine to food, the cardinal point of attention, let us examine the various elementary substances in nature, in order to ascertain their relation to the animal economy. We observe at the very outset, one fundamental difference existing among them, in virtue of which they are divisible into two classes. The first of these embraces those bodies which are either essential to, or enter into the composition of the animal frame; the second includes those which are foreign to the organism, and the presence of which, even in comparatively minute quantities, disturbs the equilibrium of the functions and induces disease. The former of these, then, comprises constituent or alimentary bodies which, in proper combination are homogeneous to the animal tissues; the latter a list of elements which are incapable, under all existing circumstances, of healthful assimilation, and hence, in regard to these tissues, are intrinsically heterogeneous or poisonous. To the constituents belong, as the chemist demonstrates, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, sulphur, phosphorus, chlorine, fluorine, magnesium, calcium, sodium, potassium, iron, silicium, &c. The non-constituent or foreign class embraces arsenic, gold, silver, platina, tin, zinc, mercury, antimony, nickel, bismuth and many others.

A little reflection will now satisfy us that the above difference is fraught with important consequences to the pathologist and physician. To prosecute the thought, let us take iron and arsenic as examples. Iron is an indispensable element to blood and muscle, and is found in smaller quantities in other living matters; *some* iron, then, is normal or healthy, but neither the solids nor fluids, when sound, contain the least appreciable particle of arsenic. More recent chemical research has, indeed, occasionally pointed out the exist-

ence in the animal tissues, of lead, copper, and other substances, not always recognised as constituent bodies, but nearer examination justifies the conclusion that several such are casual or extraneous, rather than constant, while the total absence of all physical proof of the presence of many other elements found in nature, stamps the above as a legitimate scientific distinction. To return, iron, then, is one of the animal elements, and as such, subject to excess and deficiency ; but, is this the case with arsenic ? The answer is no ; the least portion of it, in a healthy living organ, is hostile. In this aspect, therefore, iron is dietetic, an orderly and constant supply of it being necessary to the economy ; arsenic, on the other hand, is potential, dynamic or alterative, its use being not for nourishment, but for exerting a modifying power over the morbid vital processes, until such time as, these being corrected, it may be eliminated from the organism. The function in medicine of arsenic, and of the class to which it belongs, may be aptly compared to that denominated *catalytic*, in the language of chemistry, as will be readily understood by the scientific student. The conversion of starch, by boiling it with dilute sulphuric acid, into several kindred bodies, among which are gum and grape sugar, furnishes one of the most interesting examples of this phenomenon. In this result the acid undergoes no change, its simple presence being adequate to insure the transformation of starch into sugar. The decomposition of oxygenated water, by the contact of platinum and silver, is a still purer catalytic result. The effects of the acid and the silver, under these circumstances, taking place without combination or loss of the agents, illustrate what is termed dynamic action.

The criticism just rendered on iron, is, of course, equally applicable to every nutrient, and again the relations of arsenic hold uniformly good of all dynamic or catalytic elements. I have already remarked that these nutritive substances, in due proportions, compose the animal fabric ; when they fall beneath the normal or regular standard, this deficiency just as certainly entails disorder as their excess. The

one state, in fact, is starvation, the other repletion. Without lime, for example, the secretion of milk fails, the bones and teeth grow soft, or are arrested in their development; without soda, no bile can be formed; without phosphorus and magnesia, the nervous tissues lose their energy, and the impaired condition of the brain is evinced by loss of memory, frightful headaches and impending paralysis; ghastly paleness, prostration, faintings and coldness, attend the lack of carbon; deprived of sulphur, the hair would rapidly cease to grow, and the absence of iron is marked by lividity, disordered digestion, passive dropsy, and other symptoms of an anæmic or chlorotic character.

The food we receive daily furnishes the natural source of these alimentary substances, and serves, during health, to repair the waste of these matters through the skin, kidneys, and other excretories consequent upon the voluntary and vegetative functions of the economy. Hence the equilibrium is preserved. Inordinate use of particular organs induces a disproportionate consumption of their substance, and hence of the elements from which this substance is formed. Excesses in watching, thought, and muscular effort, for example, by overtaking the brain and muscular fibre, render these tissues rapidly effete, and, therefore, cause an exaggerated demand for their peculiar pabulum, as phosphorus and iron. It is easy thus to perceive how the highly artificial or voluntary life, so distinctive of man, breaks the vegetative balance and produces impoverishment of nutrition. On the contrary, inefficiency of the excretory organs, bad medication and vicious feeding lead equally, sooner or later, to a surplus of one or more vital constituents.

These remarks suffice briefly to illustrate the subject and to prepare us for the next step in the investigation, which is evidently to determine their practical bearing on the elaboration of the *materia medica*, and consequently, their influence in the treatment of the sick. If the views I have taken be correct, it is plainly erroneous to suppose that the cure of a malady always requires positive treatment, that is to say,



*something* to be administered in the way of medicine. Cases are presunable, nay, demonstrable, in which the main duty devolving on the rational physician should be the exclusion of some specific organic element ascertained to preponderate already in the organism.

The only method known to the vitalist of determining the action on the human body, of various substances, is watching and noting the changes which ensue on administering them to the healthy subject. Such was the course pursued by the modern master, and such are the results submitted to the world in his *Pure Materia Medica*. Among the substances there tried, we find many of the nutrient class, viz. : ammonia, lime, magnesia, soda, phosphorus, silex, carbon, potash, sulphur, iron, &c. It is in place here, however, to observe, that he contemplated only a purely positive pathogenesis, the nature of his experiments having been such as to ensure a class of symptoms dependent on an excess of the substance under trial. Hahnemann's records of dietetic agents are, indeed, particularly remarkable for symptom-groups of an apparently antagonistic character. These are classified by him as primary and secondary effects; the first, according to his opinion, being the product of the remedy, the other the re-action of the constitution. These secondary groups may represent, then, a comparative, but by no means an absolute or abnormal deficiency of vital elements. I have already, however, said sufficient to show that positive pathogeneses can never exhibit the indications for the employment of special nutritive elements. To assert the contrary would, in fact, be to maintain that surplus and lack of these elements are betrayed by precisely the same phenomena. Such an assumption is contrary to reason and experience. We derive, hence, the important practical conclusion, that it behoves us to enter upon a new order of drug-provings, which shall embrace the negative pathogeneses of all the alimentary substances. These trials will reveal the individual changes of the organism under the privation of particular elements, and thus pave the way to a system of accurate special dietetics. Studied

in this light, the positive symptoms of dietetic bodies would, in all cases, point out, not their homœopathicity, but their identity or isopathic quality in diseases they resemble. This position is of the gravest import, and, if not erroneously founded, shows that the positive results of organic elements, now exhibited in our *Materia Medica*, are to be regarded as contra-indications of their use in disease. I should avoid iron, for example, because the parallelism between its positive effects and my ailment indicated its excess in my constitution, or I should choose silex, because the symptoms of its negative trials, corresponding with my own, showed an impoverishment of that particular constituent. Thus, abstinence from acids is found proper in softening of the bones, and I have known inveterate catarrhs permanently ameliorated by the abandonment of common salt, (chloride of sodium.) Yet, apart from the distinctions I have just drawn, phosphoric acid would seem homœopathic to bone-softening, and no remedies in our service appear more appropriate in pulmonary catarrhs than the different forms of soda.

The prosecution of negative or privative trials would obviously present far greater difficulties than have been encountered in drug-provings hitherto. Each experiment of this kind must be grounded upon the systematic exclusion, from the diet, of the article on trial. It might, in all probability, be impossible totally to eliminate it; perhaps a reduction of it to the minimum would be sufficient, especially as these researches would require to be tested and perfected by the co-operation of the physiological chemist. Lime provings would admit, for instance, of the use of potatoes, peas, and perhaps occasionally of oat meal and wheat; it is much more abundant, however, in rye and barley, whence preparations from these would weaken the result. Again, animal muscle, milk, cheese, and shell-fish, abound in lime, and, therefore, would be totally inadmissible. The nutritious grains, generally, contain a great deal of silex, hence, the use of unbolting meal would spoil the negative pathogenesis of this substance. In the composition of rye, we find about twenty-one times

as much oxide of iron as in potatoes; the starvation trials of iron would, consequently, make the former inadmissible. The yolks of eggs, also, are so rich in iron that their continued use as diet might elicit the symptoms of a surplus of this metal.

It is not my purpose, however, to extend here the details of this subject, but only to expose its principles, extent and connection with chemical and dynamic medicine.

There remains yet to be considered one important feature of the action on the constitution of assimilable substances. I mean their behavior in states of combination. The effects of vegetable and mineral acids, compound bases and plants, generally, present great varieties, and are often very different from what, judging from their analyses, we have been led to conjecture. Carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen, so congenial to human want in the form of egg-white and cheese, combine, either all or in part, in different proportions and form the palsyng strychnine, or the still deadlier prussic acid. Oxalic and nitric acids, and the wide range of vegetable alkaloids, are examples of this truth. Of these articles, the homœopathic *Materia Medica* embraces a large number, the symptoms of many of them are minute and extensive, and we prescribe them daily with greater or less success. Such results appear, at first sight, to controvert the views I have offered, and to demonstrate no essential distinction to exist between the laws of pure food-elements and medicinal bodies. This doubt will cease to embarrass us, if we consider that worn-out tissues, which obviously consist of alimentary elements, could never be extruded from the system, were not certain combinations of these elements possible, inharmonic to, and incompatible with the healthy structures—in other words, if carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen, were under all circumstances capable of appropriation, it is plain enough that the economy would never part with them at all. Hence, it is evident that the presence of excretory matters, in the constitution, must necessarily awaken reactions or morbid manifestations, and in-so-far, simulate the general results observed from the presence of strictly foreign elements.

This elucidation of the apparent discrepancy alluded to above, if not sufficiently full for future purposes, seems, nevertheless, satisfactory, and gives a clue for unravelling this intricate and interesting matter. Minute quantities of nitric, oxalic, and, I believe, of prussic acid, are digestible, that is to say, capable of resolution by the organism into their constituent elements, and thence of appropriation, according to the normal laws of the economy ; in larger quantities, however, the vital powers proving insufficient to rend or decompose them, they retain their proper organic combinations unbroken, and, hence, act as dynamic or chemical integers. This view is strengthened by the fact that, in certain morbid states, cyanogen and oxalic and nitric acids pass the kidneys, thus proving the cognate vital relations of these and similar bodies to uric acid and urea, which are the limits of the vital disintegrating power. The laws of vegetable remedies appear identically the same, and we find that heat, moisture and exposure, so far break up their constitutions as to prevent them from exerting a unitary action. Many poisonous plants are rendered edible by culinary processes. This explanation will perhaps serve also to show why we are not unfrequently disappointed in the operation of composite constituent remedies, their dynamic effect being lost if they undergo assimilation.

Before concluding what I have to present on this topic, I wish to be distinctly understood as not proposing to supplant vital or dynamic, by chemical medicine. My object has been to show the boundaries of each and their mutual relations. Chemical medicine is inadequate to meet functional changes ; on the other side, dynamic remedies will never, *per se*, feed the starved organs nor render superfluous the banishment of some constituent, prone to accumulate. It seems highly probable that our results in chronic diseases are sometimes transient, because the reviving activity of affected organs is overwhelmed by reiterated material causes.

Hahnemann's psora doctrine, is, in fact, only the rudi-



mental philosophy of subjective disease. His views herein, are, indeed, differently received by his followers, by some dogmatically embraced, by others totally rejected; happily they in no wise practically affect the great body of Homœopathy or dynamic medicine proper, but they out-shadow the significance of substance as well as function or form in disease, and show that his far-reaching mind detected the necessity of a scientific method applied to the former. Dynamic and elemental medicine are really inseparable; they are related as passion to subject; the first concerns effects, the second causes—the grammar of the one is Homœopathy, of the other, Chemistry.

I shall have accomplished enough for the present, in behalf of this theme, if I succeed in arousing the attention of the school to its reality, and to the importance of exhaustive or negative trials of food-elements. That such trials must prove of great clinical value, and conduce especially to our success in the treatment of chronic diseases appears beyond a doubt. An examination of the nature of crisis belongs here, and is closely interwoven with the above considerations, but it would be technical and, hence, out of place in an address of a partly popular character.

As the forum for thought, directed towards the advancement of medical science, this academy avows its congeniality. Itself the offspring of a great reform, fettered by no political nor constitutional restraint, it recognises no invidious distinctions between those who, approving and applying the great leading truth and fraternising bond, *similia similibus curantur*, entertain differences of opinion on subordinate points. It disclaims all right to official interference in the mooted doctrine of doses, the authority of names, the freedom of private judgment and questions of forensic etiquette. This spirit of toleration embraces, and promises, by degrees, to obliterate all the sectarianism of our school. Asperities of discussion on the worth of attenuated medicines have often clouded the investigation in mere partisanship, or misled the public judgment to false and ridiculous issues. On this

head, the patriarchs of American Homœopathy have been pretty equally divided, the eldest of them, indeed, who now honors this Academy with his fellowship, still holds, after a practice of five and twenty years, large latitude on this subject. It is again a source of mutual congratulation that the conduct of our fellows, generally, towards their allopathic colleagues, as it regards counsel, is manly and enlightened, and must eventually correct the illiberal proscription we now encounter at their hands, on account of our scientific creed. A high wall around the house of every homœopathist, would check the spread of his doctrine quite as effectually as academic protest. No quarantine can arrest the pervading atmosphere of reform.

In point of numbers, our Academy is the nucleus of the continent. That it as yet proclaims no large achievement, should neither surprise us nor disparage it. It is still a rallying point, it is still growing to that strength which shall fitly represent its function and render it the shield and ornament of American Homœopathy. Such a destiny can well forego immature fruit. Its mission, when it shall have reached riper stamina, is to teach, to give garnerings worthy of the art to pupils worthy of its service. It is difficult, at present, to form a school, in every respect satisfactory to the demands of Homœopathy. Many branches of medical education can, doubtless, be fully represented, but who will vaunt his lore in unravelling the secret virtues of plants and minerals, as the earnest student longs to explore them, and what one of us will rashly venture to don the robe of a Hahnemann or a Rau and sit in that office which all others subserve and to which they all converge, the office whose symbol is the chair of therapeutics? I hazard nothing in saying that the professors who hold such honored posts, in homœopathic colleges already instituted, are most alive to the modesty which befits an aspirant to these dignities. Till the time, then, shall come that some among us are actuated to such functions, by that spontaneous impulse that ever pervades the true artist, that ever attests his inborn fitness for his calling



and that, alone, inspires him to the excellence which renders him the type of the use he executes, let our *esprit de corps* be exerted in such performance of our duties at the bed-side as will fulfil their promise and exalt the respect due to our profession. To accomplish such is, indeed, the crowning triumph of the practitioner of medicine. They are the crucial trial of his learning, sagacity and skill. Beyond the study or the lecture room, medical speculations have no solid abiding place. They savor of the lamp and of solitude, they pall upon the uninitiated and perchance recoil at the contact of realities as from men in armor. It is the practising physician who bears the merit and demerit of medical systems. He it is who does battle with the ruthless legions of disease. Of him, the patient requires not precedent, not authority, not hypothesis, but action and success. His current life is a constant repetition of this ordeal. To do his work, therefore, and do it well, deserves an honored membership in his art. None comprehend so well as he the actual condition and the actual needs of his profession, none understand, like him, the dignity of a diagnostic and the value of a cure. His hope is in the redemption of his art from the dusky recesses of conjecture and concealment and its restoration to certainty and precision. His faith compasses the possibility of these great objects. To ignore them as the ends, however distant, of medical research, is to abandon its goal and degrade its practice to the level of instinct or the chaos of accident.

The patient study of the phenomena exhibited by the organism in sickness and in health, and of its modifications from outer causes, is the only means we possess of advancing in this pursuit. Such contemplation must lead to the evolution of principles which reveal the *nexus* of nature's operations and which, once obtained, give us mastery over their order, and thus enable man to realise the imprescriptible lordship of his destiny.

To grace this, in its fulness, the chemist directs the flashing battery, or toils over the careful tube; the philosopher dives into the hidden sympathies of the magnet, anatomists

call the microscope to aid, and psychologists introvert their thought and gaze on soul—each intent upon his work, sees not, growing slowly beneath his hands, the towering pile, which the sun of some auspicious morning shall suddenly irradiate to glorious symmetry.

For the present, then, let us address ourselves to the useful, nay, indispensable tasks, prophetic of this completeness; tasks which though not triumphal, are manly and even noble, and entitle us to a welcome brotherhood in that scattered band, who shall, one day, hold festive reunion, and whom art shall emancipate in her wide-spread Sabbath.

